
Introduction

The end of the Cold War after 20 years: Reconsiderations, retrospectives and revisions

Daniel Deudney^{a,*} and G. John Ikenberry^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, The Johns Hopkins University, 356 Mergenthaler 3400 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218, USA.

^bDepartment of Politics, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, 116 Bendheim Hall, Princeton, New Jersey 08544, USA.

*Corresponding author.

International Politics (2011) **48**, 435–440. doi:10.1057/ip.2011.16

Introduction

The end of the Cold War was a momentous development, a watershed in world politics that was both sudden and largely unexpected – and its twentieth anniversary is at hand. This cluster of events – the end of bipolar rivalry, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany, far-reaching nuclear arms reductions and the end of international communism – all set the stage for a new era of world politics organized around American unipolarity and the hegemony of capitalism and liberal democracy. One era ended and a new one began.

In the wake of the end of the Cold War, theorists advanced a variety of competing explanations. A major debate unfolded, touching on multiple aspects of this grand historical turn. Along the way, many of the most important questions in international relations theory were at stake and in play. Realists emphasized the importance of shifting power and American assertiveness. Liberals emphasized the character of the Western system and the opportunities and constraints it presented to the Soviet side. Globalists emphasized the centrality of nuclear vulnerability and its imperatives for reconciliation. Others emphasized the centrality of the economic weakness of state socialism and its implications for international rivalry and its domestic performance. Yet, others emphasized the importance of transnational movements, the transmission of ideas, the role of popular culture and information, shifting norms of legitimacy and transformational leadership. The end of the Cold War was a development – like the Cold War itself – that no major



theoretical position could fail to engage. It was also a development, like the Cold War itself, that defined the terms of policy debate in the two decades that followed.

This special issue provides the fruits of a project that has brought together leading scholars to debate the end of the Cold War in its many facets. Most of the articles were written by scholars who have previously made major contributions and arguments about the end of the Cold War. Our goal has been to assemble a collection of articles that offer – 20 years later – reflections, restatements and reconsiderations. Each contributor was asked to restate his/her position or argument and then advance the debate further by reflecting and reconsidering and possibly revising these positions in the light of new evidence and subsequent developments. We are interested in both the theoretical and policy ramifications of the end of the Cold War. What does the end of the Cold War tell us about the performance of our grand theories of international relations? And how do our grand theories help us understand the extraordinary shifts in world politics that were occasioned by the end of the Cold War? Out of these theoretical reflections, we are also interested in their implications for our ongoing debates about American and European foreign policies and the future of relations between the United States, Europe and Russia.

Theoretical Debates

Taken together, the articles that follow demonstrate that an important theoretical debate still exists about the causes and consequences of the Cold War's end. Despite important areas of common agreement, there is still no overall agreement about major dimensions of these events. In part, this theoretical divergence reflects the complexity of the events that marked the end of the Cold War. Thus, theorists not only disagree on the causes and consequence of particular events, but they also disagree on which events were most important and in need of explanation. For many, the story is essentially an internal Soviet story, whereas for others the East–West rivalry and the new diplomacy of the Gorbachev region are at least equally important. There are also important differences of emphasis regarding the relative importance of events in Eastern Europe and Germany, the internal dynamics of Gorbachev's domestic situation, and the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States and the initiatives and policies of the Reagan administration. There was also a strong disagreement about whether it is appropriate to speak of a 'settlement' of the Cold War analogous to the great negotiated agreements associated with the post-War conferences of Vienna, Versailles and Yalta/Potsdam, or whether the treaties were essentially ratifications of a shift in power and position.



In organizing the article of this collection, we have divided the positions in the debate into three broad clusters on the basis of the factors that these authors emphasize as being most important in catalyzing this change.

Section 1, International Rivalry, the Western System, and Nuclear Weapons, contains four articles that look at the role of the Soviet Union's relationship with the rest of the world as the decisive locus for much of the story and for factors that decisively shaped the outcomes. Despite this shared emphasis on the external, all four of these authors acknowledge that an internal crisis of the Soviet system provided the necessary precondition for Soviet reorientation and the Cold War settlement. But they are united in arguing that external factors and relations had logics independent of the Soviet domestic predicament and that the outcome of the Cold War is unintelligible without a careful appreciation of their dynamics.

There is a vigorous debate among those focused on the international and external dimensions. William Wohlforth advances a strong argument that Soviet retrenchment is well explained as the result of the relative decline of the Soviet Union in relation to its Cold War rival, the United States and the Western alliance. In this view, the basic outlines of the end of the Cold War is neither surprising nor particularly novel in the longer annuals of interstate relations viewed through the lens of realist theory. In contrast, Henry Nau, advancing a strong version of the view known as the Reagan Victory School, emphasizes the consequences of the policies of the Reagan administration in pushing the Soviet Union to an untenable position that the Gorbachev regime essentially then adjusted to. In Nau's argument, not only Western material power, shored up by the Reagan defense build-up, SDI, and the economic recovery, but also the ideological assertiveness of the superiority of a Western model, played decisive roles in precipitating the end of the Cold War. The diplomatic historian Mary Sarotte, focuses on one of the key events in the diplomatic transformation of Soviet–Western relations, the talks on the reunification of Germany in 1989–1990 during the Bush administration. Looking closely at the negotiations between the Soviets, the Americans and the Europeans, Sarotte's account emphasizes the importance of competing settlement architectures and their interplay with the visions and interests of the leaders and their states. Offering yet another perspective, Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry argue that Gorbachev's Soviet Union was essentially adapting to outside constraints and opportunities, but they emphasize the centrality of the West as a complex type of state system and of shared nuclear vulnerabilities as the decisive features of the international environment to which Gorbachev responded. In sharp contrast to Nau and the Reagan Victory School, they argue that Reagan's assertiveness did little to alter the real balance but served as the catalyst for an important learning episode about the dangers of the rivalry and the need for a far-reaching transformation of the



relationship. While emphasizing the objective character of the West and shared nuclear vulnerability as factors, they also emphasize that the recognition of these realities depended upon the unexpected liberal internationalism and progressive Marxism infusing Gorbachev's view of the world and the unexpected convergence of Reagan and Gorbachev on a view of nuclear vulnerabilities that was quite different from the conventional views within both the American and the Soviet national security states.

In Section 2, Economic Performance and Political System, the focus is on the Soviet Union's domestic economy and politics. Here, the decisive factors are understood to be primarily domestic in the stagnant and declining performance of the economy and in the configurations of intrastate interests and coalitions. Here, arguments tend to be more complimentary than competing, with some emphasizing the fundamental centrality of economic decline, whereas others look at the way the Soviet political system channeled and blocked responses and reforms.

Anders Ausland argues that the fundamental fact in explaining the end of the Cold War was the inherent limitations of state socialism as an economic system. Furthermore, he argues that the perestroika efforts by Gorbachev to reform the socialist economy were ill conceived, shifting, and their net effect was to greatly compound the problem, turning chronic underperformance into a crisis. Focusing on the politics of Soviet policy making, Jack Snyder argues that the structure of the Soviet political system fundamentally impeded the prospects for significant change. In Snyder's view, Gorbachev was drawn to new approaches in foreign policy as well as economic governance in order to outflank well-established economic and foreign policy elites, his efforts to do this were ultimately unsuccessful as the constituencies for the new approaches that Gorbachev sought to mobilize were not strong enough to counter the entrenched power of the Soviet system. Randall Collins argues that a combination of 'state breakdown' theory of revolution and geopolitical theory illuminate the pressures and crises that beset the Soviet regime. Here, the focus is on the way a confluence of factors – fiscal crisis, associated with military costs, elite disagreements over policy and political mobilization – along with geopolitical pressures made the perpetuation of the Soviet imperial system unsustainable.

In Section 3, Society, Culture and Ideas, attention is directed to process and ideational variables that are often overlooked and taken for granted by structural, materialist and interest-based arguments. Here, analysts attribute primary importance to the role of ideas, changes in ideas and the ways in which ideas relate to domestic interests and transnational networks.

Both Thomas Risse and Robert English offer accounts of the end of the Cold War that are broadly constructivist in their emphasis on the importance of ideas and discourse in framing and shaping the behavior of actors. Thomas Risse argues that the Gorbachev new thinking was significantly shaped by



ideas imported from the West, but that Gorbachev's ability to put these ideas into practice was constrained and enabled in complex ways by the discursive practices of the Europeans, the Reagan administration and Soviet domestic actors. Like Henry Nau, Risse argues that the Cold War was at its heart a struggle of ideas and that its ending was significantly brought about by a convergence of ideas. But in contrast to Nau, Risse attributes little positive contribution to the Cold War's end from the ideological assertiveness of the Reagan administration. Robert English also provides an account in which ideas about grand strategy and world order held by the Gorbachev circle played a prominent role in shaping the reorientation of Soviet foreign policy and provided the basis for the Soviet retrenchment and accommodation that marked the end of the Cold War. Like Risse and Deudney and Ikenberry, English's account of the origins and content of the ideas behind Gorbachev's New Thinking emphasizes the influence of Western liberal globalist and arms control thought. English likewise connects ideas to the transnational networks that conveyed them, providing an explanatory narrative in which the complex interplay of process, ideas and interests work together to shape policy outcomes. Stepping back from these accounts, Michael Cox offers reflections on the ways in which 'history' and lessons drawn from the past, helped shape the way in which policy-makers viewed the twin revolutions that constituted the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR. As he shows, looking backwards made policy-makers decidedly nervous when confronted with revolutionary change. In the public discourse, there may have been much talk of the West having won and liberalism having trumped its rivals. At the highest levels, however, there was a good deal more concern about what the international system might look like following the collapse of the European order in 1989 and the implosion of the other superpower 2 years later.

Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, scholars know vastly more about these ends than they did when they were unfolding but are no closer to an overall consensus about many important aspects of these epochal changes. A full resolution of this debate is ultimately unlikely in part due to the complexities and ambiguities of the events themselves. But consensus will also be elusive in part due to the fact that the different interpretations are rooted in and are expressions of broadly different and perennially clashing theories of politics and international order. Despite the absence of consensus, arguments about the end of the Cold War will be of continuing importance in part because of the importance of the end of the Cold War in the history of the twentieth century and also because interpretations of the end of the Cold War, often boiled down to simple historical axioms, continue to play a role in contemporary foreign policy and grand strategy. Furthermore, the debate over the end of the Cold War is implicated in the ongoing struggles within Russia to find a satisfactory post-communist future both at home and in the world. Finally, the



debate over the end of the Cold War is a debate about major features of world politics such as capitalism, international institutions and nuclear weapons which are continuing to evolve, and as views of them change based on new experiences our perspective on the end of the Cold War and the role of these factors in it will also continue to change.

About the Authors

Daniel Deudney is professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University and the author of *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory From the Polis to the Global Village*.

G. John Ikenberry is Albert G. Milbank professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, a Global Eminence Scholar at Kyung Hee University and the author of *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*.